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# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTIONS

“Stairs Start to Crumble All Over America  
with the Scratching of a Pen”: Honoring Laura Hershey . . . 13  
MEG DAY

The Groundwork for a Movement: Poet and Disability Activist  
Laura Hershey. . . . . 22  
NIKI HERD

A Note About the Text. . . . . 28

## SELECTED POEMS

I Am, I Am Not . . . . .	30
If Faith. . . . .	31
In the Way. . . . .	33
Monster Body . . . . .	36
Message . . . . .	38
Lunch Break. . . . .	40
Insomnia. . . . .	43
canyon . . . . .	45
Sentence . . . . .	46
Orion on the Porch . . . . .	48
Delving . . . . .	50
We Weren't Carded . . . . .	53
all day i talk to my word processor . . . . .	54
The Gamble . . . . .	55
Working Together . . . . .	57

Hate, But . . . . .	58
the mom and pop print shop hop, or how eagles . . . . .	62
How to Write a Poem . . . . .	64
A Call to Arms . . . . .	66
Special Vans . . . . .	67
Telling . . . . .	69
Note from Oregon. . . . .	71
You Get Proud by Practicing. . . . .	72
Honor . . . . .	76
Translating the Crip . . . . .	79
Why I Am Not a Christian . . . . .	83
What Kind of Death. . . . .	84
Sex . . . . .	86
Sending a Message. . . . .	88
Rain Traffic . . . . .	89
Progress . . . . .	90
On the Lawn . . . . .	93
Petrona. . . . .	100
Petunias . . . . .	104
etc. . . . .	106
Fertility Goddess. . . . .	109
Pain Too . . . . .	112
Praise. . . . .	113
Oral History Project: Interviewing My Mother . . . . .	114
No Deal . . . . .	116
Morning Contact . . . . .	118
Loyalty. . . . .	120
Like Air . . . . .	122
Labors of Love. . . . .	124
Intermission . . . . .	126
Drink . . . . .	129
Don't Hold Hands While They Feed You . . . . .	131
Ill at Ease . . . . .	133
Hunger. . . . .	135

Hands . . . . .	137
The Ones Who Go to Jail . . . . .	139
Ghost . . . . .	142
Flights . . . . .	144
Fingers . . . . .	146
Eating . . . . .	148
dusk . . . . .	150
Development. . . . .	151
Dawn-Pull . . . . .	152
The Cops vs. ADAPT . . . . .	153
Connection . . . . .	157
Big Clouds . . . . .	158
And She Will Also Want to Draw the Water . . . . .	160
One King Bed, Non-Smoking, Conference Rate, Access . . . . .	164
Adventure . . . . .	165
Conditioning. . . . .	166
a question of imagination . . . . .	167
Dreams of a Different Woman . . . . .	168
A Day . . . . .	169

SELECTED PROSE

Remember . . . . .	173
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PHOTO GALLERY

Selected Images . . . . .	176
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ESSAYS ON LAURA HERSHEY

“I Go on Deciding on Pride”: Writing as a Stay Against Erasure in the Poetry of Laura Hershey. . . . .	187
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CONSTANCE MERRITT

Reading Laura's Poems . . . . .	207
ELI CLARE	
Untranslatable Crip: Laura Hershey's Poetic Labor to Build Crip Power . . . . .	222
LEAH LAKSHMI PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA	
"your tire marks through the petunias": Laura Hershey's Queer, Crip Eco poetics . . . . .	234
DECLAN GOULD	
EDITORS' NOTES . . . . .	247
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	248

# INTRODUCTIONS

## “STAIRS START TO CRUMBLE ALL OVER AMERICA WITH THE SCRATCHING OF A PEN”: HONORING LAURA HERSHEY

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On the night I was supposed to meet Laura Hershey for the first time, she was a no-show.

We had corresponded for a handful of years—brief, lively transmissions about disabled poets or ADAPT paperwork, accessible MFAs—and I’d wrung my hands in anticipation since Lambda Literary Foundation’s press release announced our names together in the 2010 class of Emerging Writer Fellows. As is so often the case when we come up without access to our own lineages, I knew little of Laura Hershey’s life, the expansiveness of it, and the great extent to which the work she’d done in the world had made much of my life—especially my education—possible. Whatever respect and recognition I lent Hershey at the time now seems trivial in comparison to her actual contributions. Hershey was a nationally recognized activist in the disability community, campaigning to increase the visibility of Deaf and disabled LGBTQ folks; to protect Deaf and disabled women from becoming domestic violence statistics; to eliminate work disincentives from social security; to increase independent living; to promote Medicaid home and community-based services; and to protect the rights of home care workers and assistive attendants. She was critical in the direct-action movements that led to accessible public transportation, interpreters and attendants in mainstreamed public schools, and the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.



But what I knew of her that night in Los Angeles was simple and life-giving: Laura Hershey was the first out queer disabled poet I'd ever read on paper. Though our experiences of disability and gender differed greatly, hers were the first poems where I witnessed my own multiplicity coalesce in English. It's easier for me now—though still not easy—to imagine a future as a disabled, queer activist and poet; at the time—and in these times—any one of those identities could get a person killed. Looking around, one might think that surely the combination of them already had. And yet: Laura Hershey.

We learn early that erasure, both literal and figurative, is one of the more vicious and duplicitous tenets of ableism—discrimination, violence, and social prejudice committed against disabled individuals and communities in order to protect and center the nondisabled. The more difficult it is to locate evidence of an experience, the more convincing its nonexistence, its irrelevance. The contemporary eugenics movement, in all its shifty iterations, has made it easy for nondisabled folks to rationalize the exclusion of disability. When Laura Hershey didn't show up that night, I worried. One Lambda fellow shrugged at her absence, suggested she might've changed her mind about attending. Disabled folks know better. We knew immediately who in the room was kin because we all shifted, re-evaluated the width of the door, mentally scanned the evening for stairs.

The next morning, the email arrived: Problems with travel. Lost luggage, lost tech. Missing piece of ventilator equipment. No local replacements. Resting. Send the assignment and see you later.

That afternoon in workshop, Laura Hershey took us to the mat.

The poet in me wants  
to be out there, beyond the pane  
with the other poets.  
The poet in me wants  
to meet and greet,

get my gay on,  
shine my wit, my stories:  
march of buoyant wheeling protests around  
marble departments;  
songs on long bumpy bus rides from Beijing to  
muddy Huairou.<sup>1</sup>

I remember clearly the feeling in the room. Hershey sat reading at one end of the long seminar table, while another eight of us flanked its sides evenly, holding our breath.

Imagine friendship incubated in deep reserves  
of stamina and eloquent gesture.  
Imagine so much lung capacity  
you can afford to burn some of it away  
in loud laughter and tobacco leaf.  
Imagine writing about reliable bodies  
striding unpaved rocky terrain,  
and coupling toward revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Some of us shifted uncomfortably in our seats. A few of us grinned. Game on.

I'd never before been in a workshop with another proudly out disabled poet. I had no aptitude for it and reached or retreated in inconsistent ways, uncertain of how to ally without undercutting, champion without projecting. I had spent so much of graduate school defending the disability and Deafness in my work that I had little idea of how to critically celebrate and tend it when there was more than one of us at the table. Hershey's poems were bold, audacious, uncompromising. She wrote candidly about ableism, about queer crip sex and desire, and about the thorny wonder of having recently finalized the adoption of a teenager with her partner of twenty years, disabled activist and lawyer, Robin Stephens. Hershey modeled how to take up space without apologizing, how to make disability the given and not the exception. Hershey was as much about using a poem to tell